

Psychedelic Drugs and the Fine Arts in the 1960s and 1970s

by Ashley Park

The time period of the 1960s and 1970s was very unique. It marked an era called the “counter-culture movement.” This era was labeled as a time when people abandoned traditional, conservative ways of life for more expressive, rebellious, and non-conforming ways of living. During this time period, psychedelic drugs were on the rise. Specifically prevalent was lysergic acid diethylamide, more commonly known as LSD. A very diverse population used this popular drug, ranging from normal people to celebrities. The drug’s effects are very evident on people, as it is shown through pop culture, specifically music and art. LSD was a significant drug that helps to characterize the fine arts aspect of pop culture in the 1960s and 1970s.

The first primary source helps to support the research question because it gives insight on how acid affected artists’ minds and the way that they painted and perceived art. This document is an article that was written by Dr. Richard Hartmann on December 5, 1969. The purpose of this document is to explain the results of an experiment that had several artists paint under the influence of LSD. The source gives three different artists’ perspectives on how they felt while painting on LSD. Throughout this source, the author reveals the results of each of his test subjects within the experiment. Each test subject or artist that tripped on acid while painting had different styles, yet all ended up having similar experiences. According to the author, one of the artists began drawing with “both hands at once, something that the artist had never done before.”¹ This depicts how acid affects artists’ minds and the way they paint. A couple of other artists saw their paintings moving or transforming into other things. This also further supports how art is perceived differently under acid. The “phenomenon of color intensification under LSD is well known.”² The changes in colors indicates how acid intensifies colors and can alter the way artists’ paint. Overall, this source gives insight on how LSD affects people’s minds and the way they paint and perceive art, thus giving a glimpse into how acid affects the art aspect of pop culture within the 1960s and 1970s.

The second primary source is an example of art that has been influenced by psychedelic drugs. This document is a poster that was created by artist Wes Wilson in 1966. The purpose of this poster is to give an example of art that has psychedelic features and characteristics. Within the poster are features that are often identified with psychedelia. These features would include the use of interesting yet odd color schemes, such as purple and orange, and the use of a unique wavy font. These features were often prominent in psychedelic art. The poster is advertising a group called “Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band.”³ Aside from this poster showing the influence of psychedelic drugs on art, it also advertises Captain Beefheart who was known to be a heavy LSD user. This source helps to

¹ Painting Under LSD. Richard Hartmann. December 5, 1969.

² Ibid.

³ Captain Beefheart. Wes Wilson. 1966.

give an example of how psychedelic drugs affected art in the sixties and seventies, as well as giving another example of a musician who was heavily influenced by LSD.

The first secondary source goes in depth on how psychedelic drugs affected the fine arts aspect of pop culture. This source is a Beatles interview with Rolling Stones Magazine in 1971. This source shows different perspectives represented by the primary sources, which would be Lennon, McCartney, and Harrison. The secondary source used in this article would be a reference to the book, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The main point of this article is the Beatles' experience with acid and how it altered their music significantly. It starts off talking about how the Beatles got into acid and how it slowly started to change their psychological being and relationships, and then began influencing their music style. It then talks about them going on tour, and their album, "Revolver." It talks about how the "Revolver" album was written while they were tripping on acid. Throughout the article, it goes through the different perspectives of the majority of the Beatles members. According to the author, John Lennon and George Harrison stated that after taking acid, they "couldn't relate to them [Paul and Ringo] anymore. It was a mammoth experience that was unexplainable."⁴ Acid had changed their psychological being and altered their life. It wasn't until "McCartney took Lennon to Indica, where he came across the book, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*" that they had come up with a new inspiration.⁵ It was soon after this whole experience that the Beatles' sound had changed. Lennon presented new songs that had interesting instruments and sounds incorporated into them. The new elements, such as backward guitar passages and Indian instruments, within the songs were not that common and were considered a credible rendition of what taking LSD might sound like. These sounds were soon the basis of what would become their "Revolver" album. The "Revolver" album was basically an album with sounds and instrumentals that would closely mimic what it would be like tripping on acid. It was because the album contained "outrageous sounds that introduced different angles in chords and melodies" that it would inspire other musicians during that era and beyond.⁴ Throughout this source, it talks about how the Beatles came about their acid experience and how it affected their music, specifically their "Revolver" album, and portrays one way in which acid affected the music aspect of pop culture in the sixties, seventies and beyond. Ultimately, this gives insight on how music and the creation of it, was affected by the influence of acid.

The second secondary source helps to answer the research question because the main point in this article is to physically describe psychedelic art during the sixties. This source is an article that was written in 2009. The author is unknown. The primary sources that the author relies on are the statements from Arnold Skolnick and Oscar Janiger. Throughout this source, the author relies on posters and art as well. There are no apparent secondary sources that are used in this article. It starts off by briefly mentioning the Woodstock festival and their iconic posters. It then goes on to talk about some of the features of psychedelic art and

⁴ The Beatles' Acid Test (Cover Story). Mikal Gilmore. 1971.

⁵ Ibid.

mentions some famous artists who have a connection to this type of art. This source focuses on how a lot of art in the sixties was influenced by drugs based on color and design. Some of the features within psychedelic art, as mentioned by this article, are “vivid colors (acid tones) in swirling shapes and patterns that mimicked hallucinations induced by drugs such as LSD.”⁶ Images characterized by these acid tones and distinct designs were evident that they were painted with some influence or inspiration from drugs such as acid. This source gives insight on how some art and the creation of it, was affected by the influence of acid.

All four of these sources are helpful in giving evidence as to how psychedelic drugs (such as LSD) influenced the fine arts aspect of pop culture during the 1960s and 1970s. The poster and different artists’ perspectives gave sufficient details on how art was influenced by psychedelic drugs. The Beatles’ narrative on their experience with acid and how it influenced their sound and “Revolver” album, gave insight as to how acid affected the music aspect of pop culture in the sixties and seventies. In order to have a more complete and confident answer, it would be helpful to have more information on how fine arts that had been influence by psychedelic drugs, affected not only famous people, but normal people as well.

⁶ High Art. Court Williams. August 2009.